

# Monroe/West Monroe, Louisiana

## Monroe/West Monroe – Ouachita Parish Community Profile

Monroe and West Monroe are located in Ouachita Parish in northeast Louisiana in a region called the Mississippi River Delta.

The nonfarming private sector economy of Ouachita Parish is driven by manufacturing, retail trade, and services. In 1998 there were an estimated 72,973 full-time and part-time employees in the parish, with approximately 33 percent in services, 24 percent in retail, and 15 percent in manufacturing. The comparison to Louisiana is shown below:

Employees	Ouachita Parish	Louisiana
Services	33%	36%
Retail Trade	24%	22%
Manuf'ing	15%	12%

There were 4,070 establishments in Ouachita Parish in 1997, with 24 percent in retail trade and 37 percent in services. The parish has a relatively large number of large employers, with a dozen entities having more than 700 employees each. Still, 86 percent of the establishments employed fewer than 20 persons.

Estab'ments	Ouachita Parish	Louisiana
Services	37%	37%
Retail Trade	24%	24%
Manuf'ing	4%	4%

In 1998, the population of Ouachita Parish was estimated at 146,830, almost half of whom live in Monroe and West Monroe. This is a much more highly populated area than any of the other pilot communities. About 50 percent of the population is employed full-time or part-time. In

1999 the unemployment rate averaged 3.8 percent – substantially below the other Louisiana pilot communities and the state average of 5.1 percent. The population of Ouachita Parish actually increased about 2 percent between 1988 and 1998, making it the only one of the three Louisiana pilot communities to gain in population over that time. In 1996, the population was 42 percent white and 57.1 percent black.

Educational attainment in Ouachita Parish, for persons 25 years and over in 1990, was 40 percent for high school graduates (the same as the state) and 11 percent for college graduates (compared to 9 percent for the state).

Per capita income for Ouachita Parish was \$12,484 in 1988 (\$13,113 for the state) and \$21,230 in 1998 (\$22,206 for the state).

## The Louisiana Workshop

The TEAM Delta workshop held in West Monroe, Louisiana, on June 8, 2000, offered information about how to create more local wealth and higher-paying jobs and about the new technology-based economy. Participants identified issues facing Madison, Ouachita, and Richland parishes, including:

- Education & training;
- Financing;
- Cooperation, community spirit, and vision; and
- Loss of population.

Participants in the workshop also identified obstacles and opportunities.

### Obstacles

Major obstacles appear to be:

- Workforce (lack of technically capable workforce, training opportunities and work ethic, and the out-migration of skilled employees )

- Lack of access to financial capital
- Social capital (lack of social contacts, cooperation, & spirit)
- Vision (thinking outside the box, positive attitude, and not being resistant to change).

### Opportunities

Major opportunities include:

- **Workforce** (opportunity to train and more fully utilize existing people & better utilize area technical colleges & university)
- **Quality of life** built around a good location, small town atmosphere, and emerging community leadership;
- **Available resources** (including transportation infrastructure, utilities, natural resources); and
- **New opportunities**, including Internet marketing that provide the opportunity to compete globally, value-added exporting, changes in education, and technology

### Workshop Evaluation

The written evaluation of the workshop showed that of the topics covered in the workshop, those ranked highly useful were:

- Value added;
- The role of technology; and
- Social capital.

The topics rated least useful were clusters & networks and traded sectors.

The evaluation also sought to determine the extent to which attendees had been involved in planning and plan implementation in their communities. Results showed that there has been very little action planning by seminar participants. By far the most planning was in the area of K-12 education, followed by tech-focused training, and focused recruitment. Research parks and angel investor networks have received the least attention.

## The Community Technology Assessment

The Monroe/West Monroe Community Technology Assessment was held December 5, 2000. Eleven community residents participated. The session began with introductions followed by the TEAM Delta facilitator asking three questions concerning their attitudes about different kinds of investments.

The first question asked participants to assume that they had \$100,000 to spend on the following three things: (a) recruiting businesses to the community, (b) assisting existing business to expand, and (c) helping new, start-up businesses. The \$100,000 could be divided among the three things in any proportion desired. The Monroe/West Monroe participants would invest 42 percent in existing businesses, 34 percent in new businesses, and 22 percent for recruiting.

The second question asked participants to assume that they had \$100,000 to spend on the following three things: (a) education, training, and human resource development, (b) technology transfer and development, and (c) capital investments. The \$100,000 could be divided among the three things in any proportion desired. The participants would invest almost half (48%) in workforce & education, 31 percent in capital investment, and 20 percent in technology.

The third question was whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that the Internet was changing everything. Only one person disagreed, although admitting that it has changed many things. Several added comments such as: "Hardly anything has escaped the influence of the Internet. E-commerce still has many problems, but they are being resolved. Existing businesses will have to change – make use of technology and the Net."

In the meetings in the other eight pilot communities, these warm-up questions were followed by discussion and compiling four lists of technology resources. The Monroe meeting, which was the last of the nine Community Technology

Assessment meetings to be held, was well attended by business people. However, the methodology used in the previous meetings in much smaller communities (identifying the main traded sector firms, support firms, soft and hard infrastructure) was difficult to pursue. There were dozens of important traded-sector firms obvious to the participants, who were primarily interested in focusing on the needs of business rather than trying to determine which of many important firms should be on such a list.

The discussion quickly became focused on soft infrastructure – particularly on workforce issues – specifically technical training and the need to begin the training (and begin preparing/educating students & parents that this type of training can lead to good jobs) by secondary school.

Although many of the participants have ties to the University of Louisiana at Monroe (ULM) and strongly support the university, the discussion on workforce needs focused on secondary schools and the technical college and the fact that LTC is not graduating students with the types of skills they need. Most if not all of the participating companies reported that they could grow faster with adequate numbers of skilled employees. Most, though not all, of the companies that attended would fall into the general category known as information technology (IT) companies – i.e., computers, networking, software development, & telecommunications.

Participants also expressed frustration with trying to identify workforce training programs & funds that could be of use to them.

In the area of hard infrastructure, participants report two concerns: telecommunications infrastructure and airline service. The telecommunications infrastructure in place is old. The participants believe that high-speed access will come, but it may take awhile. There is still no DSL service available in the area.

Participants also report that airline service is lacking – though one participant observed that everyone thought the service was good until service at the Jackson International Airport improved substantially.

## Implementation Opportunities

Participants identified a number of areas for implementation or more detailed planning, including:

- Improve coordination between LTC & the local business community, so workforce training and technology education course offerings, curricula, & time schedules better meet companies' needs;
- Work to eliminate the disconnect between high schools and technical colleges;
- Promote technical education to high school students and parents – that technical education can lead to respectable jobs with good incomes. Today, only about 20 percent of Louisiana students graduate from college, yet almost all high school education is college prep;
- Improve information available on workforce programs and initiatives (e.g., Incumbent Worker Training Program & apprenticeship programs);
- Help existing businesses understand the benefits technology can bring to them;
- Help existing businesses learn basic technical information about telecommunications & information technology;
- Address gaps in physical infrastructure (roads – N/S 4-lane; commercial airline service; improve telecommunications infrastructure & obtain DSL);
- Develop entrepreneurial skills and resources that support entrepreneurship;
- Help businesses better understand resources available to them at the university (ULM);
- Work to improve the perceptions about the technical capabilities of local companies. Technical capabilities are quite good but perception isn't; and
- Investigate the feasibility of a data center facility – to support existing and new businesses.

*Data Sources: Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of the Census, & Louisiana Department of Labor*

